

Parleys Canyon Fire – A One Year Retrospect

With a year passing since the Parleys Canyon Fire, it is a good time to reflect on the wildfire and what has occurred since the event. While relatively small in size at 541 acres, the impacts of the Parleys Canyon Fire were far reaching, occurring under prolonged and exceptional drought conditions, suppression costs exceeding \$3 million (\$4,600 per acre) and resulting in 8,000 residents evacuated. To this day, most are not aware of how close the Summit Park and Lambs Canyon communities came to losing structures from the Parleys Canyon Fire that started in Salt Lake County. Many elements came together in a perfect storm for a successful suppression outcome after the initial attack had failed. From location where the ignitions started, Interagency aerial and ground suppression resources that many times in the middle of



August might have otherwise not been available were there, to the Red Flag Warning not materializing with strong winds and low relative humidity. Had suppression resources not been able to hold the fire in the bottom of a bowl on the eastern perimeter and the fire made an upslope run towards Parley Summit, spotting would have occurred into the community. Small spot fires were located within a quarter mile of the water tanks above Summit Park. A fire modeling program called FSPRO and its analysis showed the Parleys Canyon Fire with potential to reach Kimball Junction had suppression efforts been unsuccessful. The chance of reaching Kimball Junction was low, but the probability of impacting the upper reaches of Summit Park were high.

Early on during the Parleys Canyon Fire it was identified that acceptable levels of loss might be realized within Summit Park. Areas in the upper reaches of Summit Park were not worth the risk to place firefighters in harm's way. Concerns for firefighter safety included: limited safety zones, steep, narrow, and dead-end roads, only one ingress and egress, high structure density, forest health concerns within the mixed conifer vegetation throughout the neighborhood and within 0 – 30 feet of structures (Home Ignition Zone), steep terrain and narrow canyons with structures located on mid-slope, and some structures with wooden shake shingles and wood siding. While efforts have been underway by many within Summit Park for taking on a shared responsibility to address the Home Ignition Zone and fire hardening structures, much more needs to be done if choosing to live in our fire prone environments. Based upon the USDA Forest Service and National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) Home Ignition Zone concept with structure's ignitability and the quality of the surrounding defensible space, many structures within Summit Park would have difficulty reaching out 100 to 200 feet to meet Home Ignition Zone standards considering the slope and property ownership. These concerns are being expressed by insurance companies with questioning and potential cancelation of some homeowner insurance policies within the greater Park City area.

While Safe and Effective Suppression Response is an important part and tenant of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, creating Resilient Landscapes and developing Fire Adapted Communities are also goals of the strategy. Had the suppression strategy not been effective, having treated forests between the Wildland/Urban Interface and the wildfire would have been advantageous. These are not forested stands in a desolated wilderness where natural processes such as wildfire might be desirable; they are on the doorsteps of our homes. Providing for Resilient Landscapes that reduce risk and negative impacts of wildfire on communities (ecological and human) is paramount. Creating such treated areas

further provides for firefighter safety and a willingness to consider putting firefighters into a location where a successful and safe defensive position could be made.

The Parleys Canyon Fire from last summer demonstrates how these three tenants of the Cohesive Strategy apply to the Park City area and the strategy's vision of "safely and effectively extinguish fire, when



Very Large Air Tanker making retardant drop on Parleys Canyon Fire

needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a Nation, live with wildland fire." The wildfire and its potential adverse impacts to the greater Park City area is a testament as to why all need to consider the risk if one desires to live in these fire dependent environments. As those within the wildland fire community say, "it's not a matter of if, but when a wildfire will occur."

Even before smoke had cleared the air from the Parleys Canyon Fire, concern turned to the potential for soil movement and impacts to the I-80 corridor following a major rain event. A special request was made to the Utah Watershed

Restoration Initiative (UWRI) for seeding to stabilize the soil. Nearly \$70,000 was made available from Utah Department of Natural Resources Watershed, FEMA Post Fire Hazard Mitigation, and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources for funds and in-kind services.

In addressing both Resilient Landscapes and developing Firewise Communities, the Snyderville Basin Special Recreation District had already started fuels treatment work above Summit Park and within the Tollgate area with the help of a special UWRI grant before the Parleys Canyon Fire. This work of thinning, piling, and burning of the piles within the mixed conifer forest and Gambel oak woodland communities continued. In the 2022 UWRI grant request and award, this work was extended into the communities for work to occur on private properties and extended into the Pinebrook area with the support of Summit County. Over three phases, \$4,050,281 in funding from the UWRI along with cost sharing and in-kind contributions have gone towards the Parleys Summit and Canyon areas.

These type of fuels treatments are important if we desire to live in these fire dependent ecosystems. First these treatments are intended to help protect and enhance suppression efforts in the Wildland/Urban Interface and in developing Firewise communities. Secondly the treatments help in creating Resilient Landscapes, thus when a wildfire burns through the area, the residual trees will have a better chance of surviving the effects of wildfire and other disturbances on the landscape.

Since the Parleys Canyon Fire, Park City Municipal Corporation (PCMC) completed the Treasure Hill Forest Management Plan and has started implementation of the management recommendations to address forest health and fuels management concerns. PCMC has also awarded a \$250,000 contract for a Community Wildfire Risk Assessment that is currently ongoing to set the stage for addressing the risk of wildfire within the boundary of the community and one mile beyond. In addition to the Summit Park and Tollgate Home Owners Associations, and the Pinebrook Master Association, other area HOAs have started or continue looking at the fire risk including the Enclave, Sun Peak, Glenwild, and the Colony. The Western Summit County Fuels Committee, stood up before the Parleys



Pile burning of mixed conifer at Summit Park in December 2020

Canyon Fire, continues to support fuel management efforts throughout the area and is hosting a “Living with Wildfire” Series. Park City Municipal Corporation was also designated as Firewise by NFPA. While several areas within Summit County are identified as Firewise Communities, this is not a guarantee that a community will survive a wildfire event, but that the community is working towards Firewise concepts. In addition, the Park City Fire District continues its residential chipping program and is providing wildland fire training to new recruits.

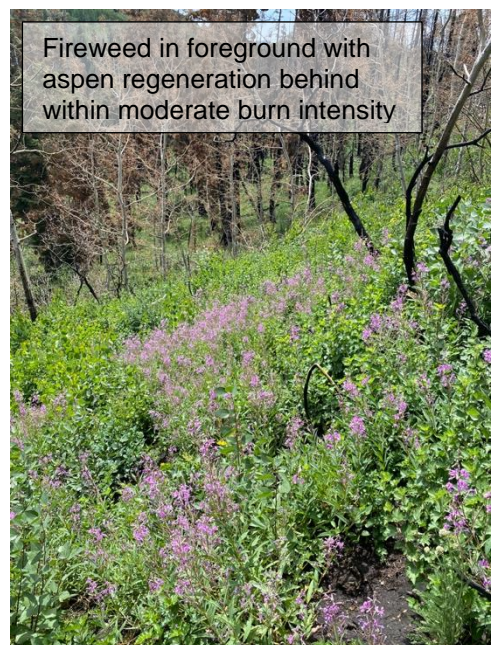


One of the biggest questions following the Parleys Canyon Fire was what would happen to the burned area and the recovery of vegetation. There was particular concern as to what would happen within the mixed conifer stands that experienced stand destroying crown fire effects. In light of climate change, would the white fir return, would Gambel oak come into these areas of high severity fire, or would nothing return to this area of sterilized and hydrophobic soil with soil movement, landslides, and avalanches occurring? Aspen root clones just waiting for fire to come into the area where white fir once occupied have exploded in areas with new aspen suckers. In other areas, both aspen and Gambel oak have been prolific in resprouting along

with herbaceous vegetation such as fireweed, Wyoming Indian-paintbrush, common chokecherry, and Pacific ninebark. While precipitation appears to have influenced the regeneration as October was well above normal with a low snowpack over the winter, but from late spring into summer every week or two the Park City area has been experiencing some rain. This successional regeneration is encouraging, as additional management action will not be required in the near term to address the fire effects from the Parleys Canyon Fire.

Many moved to this area to live in forests and with nature. Some desire to allow for natural processes to occur, but what happens when fire threatens their home or the hillside becomes unstable when rains fall following a high severity fire. There is a right place and time for such but the mixed conifer forests immediately around Parleys Summit and Park City is neither. That being said, such treatments could allow the nearby Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest to manage fire in the future if locations are known where wildland fire could be herded into without detrimentally impacting identified values at risk.

While great strides have occurred in enhancing and placing attention on developing Fire Adapted Communities and addressing Resilient Landscapes, much remains to be happened before the next Parleys Canyon Fire. It is hoped the momentum already in place and accentuated from the Parleys Canyon Fire will continue to address all three tenets of the Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and the State of Utah’s equivalent Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy looking at neighborhood to county-wide solutions to reduce the risk and effects of future wildfires while realizing the benefits of natural disturbance in these fire dependent landscapes we call home.



J. Bradley Washa – a Pinebrook resident whose neighborhood was evacuated and prior to retiring last December from the Bureau of Land Management filled in as a Division Supervisor with the Northern Utah T3 Incident Management Team on the Parleys Canyon Fire